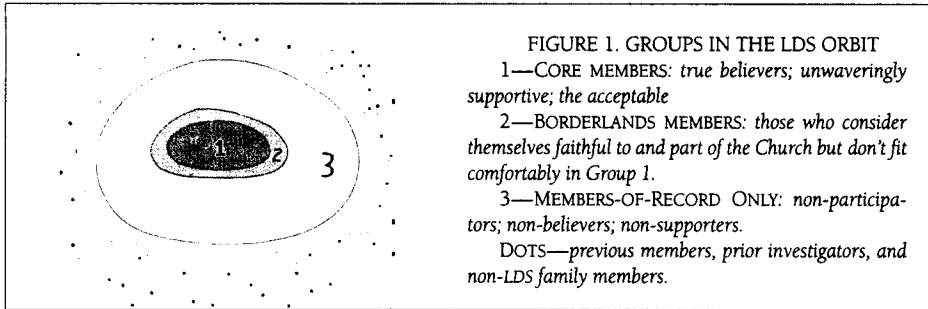


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS

EXPLORATIONS OF OPENNESS

By D. Jeff Burton



THIS COLUMN DEALS with a common question for Borderlanders: How honest and up-front about their questions and struggles should Group 2 “Borderlanders” be with Group 1 (true believers)?

For more than six months, I corresponded by email and met in person with a young man I’ll call Stephen. Imagine a typical Latter-day Saint in his mid-twenties who has filled a mission to Ireland and earned a bachelor’s degree in accounting, living in the Northwest, working in his profession but unmarried and looking for his eternal mate.

I’ve edited our exchanges for conciseness, clarity, and to protect Stephen’s identity. He has read this column and agreed to share his story. We both welcome comments or insights from readers. You can email me or write a letter to the SUNSTONE editor.

STEPHEN: I’m dealing with the most difficult thing I have ever faced, and although I have many supportive and loving family members and friends, I don’t feel that I can, or should, worry them with this. I’m typically very stable emotionally and meet life’s challenges with resolve and a plan, but I am struggling a great deal with my present challenge.

All my life, I have been a very active and believing member of the Church. All of my family are dedicated to the Church. I have always loved the Church, the teachings, the family-oriented atmosphere, Scouting, and so forth. I’ve had a great experience in the

Church and value very much the way of life, the people, and the closeness.

When trying to decide on a college, I ruled out BYU because I felt students weren’t trusted there. I had been given a great deal of trust and freedom by my parents, and I felt pretty capable of making good decisions on what to wear, when to shave, how long my hair should be, what time to be home, and who were appropriate roommates. I felt attending BYU would have been a step backwards for me. And until now, that’s been the extent of my challenges with the Church.

About a year and a half ago, I started learning some things about Church history that were new to me, and very troubling, and I’m still trying to figure out how to deal with them. [Stephen then relates his studies and especially his concerns about stories of Joseph Smith’s behavior with regard to polygamy.] As I’ve studied, my firm foundations have disintegrated. I felt as if I had been deceived in some way. How could this happen to me? I’ve heard of people losing their testimonies before, but mine had always been so strong. How could this happen to me? I wanted desperately to find answers.

I thought there must be people out there who knew all this stuff and had either found it to be wrong or had found a way to accept it and still maintain their faith. Hoping to learn more, I attended the 2001 Mormon History Association conference in Cedar City and also the Sunstone symposium in Salt Lake City. It was nice to see things being discussed in the open—something I hadn’t felt

I could do without judgment or criticism. It was interesting to see the range of people who attended, from solid believers to open critics. I’m still baffled by and even jealous of people who know the history and seem okay with it.

I suppose I could deal with this struggle indefinitely, but it has started to affect one relationship which is very important to me. And this is where I really need some help. I have been dating a woman for the past year, and we are very fond of each other. My struggle with the Church has been quietly going on in the background. I kept thinking I could fix it or find answers that would allow me to get past it.

When I finally saw I wasn’t going to be able to fix my concerns, we talked a little. I didn’t feel I could give her all the details because I didn’t want her to go through what I’ve been dealing with. All I could say was there are some historical things (mainly polygamy and the way women were brought into it) that I was having a hard time accepting as being from God.

We both wonder just what is going on—me, with the church; her, with me. I’m sure she thinks I’m nitpicking some trivial Church history issue, but to me, it is very serious. And so, here we are, confused, trying to figure out why our beautiful relationship is slipping away. It hurts so much.

I also worry about relationships with my family. I haven’t talked much with them about this, but they know something is going on. My mom will be heartbroken if my relationship breaks up. How can I explain that? I don’t want to worry my family or strain our association over Church issues.

I guess my main concerns are these: I don’t know how to fix this situation. I don’t know how to explain it to those close to me. I don’t know what my future is with the Church.

JEFF: *Your situation is a difficult one indeed. But it is not all that unusual or intractable. We don’t read about it in the Ensign, but it happens all too often. It can even be a blessing if you let it be. Unfortunately, I can’t give you any direct advice about how to solve your problem. You will have to find a way. But perhaps conversations with me, your bishop, and others might help you find the answers you seek.*

To start, I would like you to think carefully about each of the following independent (but related) statements and how they might affect you, your romantic relationship, and your disillusionment with Joseph Smith and related Church history problems:

1. *One person’s interpretation of Church history will not always be the same as another’s.*

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2. You do not need to have a complete understanding of Church history or Joseph Smith to be a good person, a good father and husband, to support the Church, or to be a follower of Jesus.

3. Each Latter-day Saint develops a personal relationship with God that is different from every other.

4. Each member has a right to develop and tailor his or her own personal relationship with God and the Church.

5. "To some it is given to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. To others it is given to believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful." (D&C 46:13-14)

6. The Church is here to help us as individuals—and that need for help varies from person to person.

7. Those who have grown up in the Church can rarely completely remove themselves from it.

8. Religion is only a part of a full and happy life.

9. A full and happy life will incorporate Christ's principles of honesty and love.

10. We are not required to tell everything we think or know to others in order to be honest and loving.

figure out how to make that work in a romantic relationship with a woman to whom I am not yet committed. I don't know how to reconcile my feelings that tell me I should fully share my concerns, knowing that they may not be acceptable to her (keeping in mind the principle that you suggest of not letting religion destroy love). Are you suggesting that I not discuss my problems with her in order to hang onto our relationship? And more generally, how shall I handle my problems with Church history—should I tell others what I know?

JEFF: No, you must find a way to share your concerns with your girlfriend. As for how to handle the problem in general, you will find a way given time and that desire. Perhaps people should know more Church history, but I don't believe it is always necessary for us to educate people about our interpretations of that history. As Joseph Smith said, "No man knows my history." Every rendition of history is an interpretation. How you "know" history is different from how others "know" the same events in history. You can read histories of Joseph Smith, for example, that support his position as a messenger from God while others "prove" that he was of the devil.

Joseph Smith lived in a different world that we can't see clearly today. I have read some of the same accounts but haven't interpreted them as negatively as you have. Joseph Smith's dimly lit adventures in polygamy are not as important to me as they are to you. And perhaps not to your girlfriend.

STEPHEN: Now we arrive at the central issue for me this past year: If my girlfriend was aware of these happenings (knowledge), would she be okay with it (interpretation)? Would she be more understanding of my struggle with them? My feeling is that if she were aware of this behavior on the part of Joseph Smith, she would struggle to be okay with it—but maybe not. Do I remain silent, leaving her baffled over what I am concerned about, and protect her faith while sacrificing our love? Or, do I attempt to talk, challenging her faith while trying (perhaps selfishly) to hang onto our love?

JEFF: This is a touchy area, and your efforts to protect her are admirable. However, the ability to describe your reservations and concerns are necessary in a mature and loving relationship. To make a marriage work, both of you must be willing and strive to understand the other (not

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11. Our religion has neither the intent nor purpose to destroy love. (In the "God versus Satan" model of religion, it is Satan that destroys love.)

12. There are stages of faith for those involved in our religion just as with all other traditions, and the more advanced stages have few absolutes.

STEPHEN: I've read your statements and am comforted to know people are finding ways to be at peace with the Church and with friends and family, while not necessarily agreeing or being okay with everything the Church does or teaches. I can see myself getting along okay in that kind of scenario and keeping friendships and family relations intact. I guess I have actually been operating that way for some time.

My present struggle, though, is: I'm not sure I could expect my potential mate, who has certain expectations from a Church standpoint, to be okay with it. If I already had a wife and family relationship, I think my approach to my recent "discovery" of troubling Church history issues would be pretty clear. I would do everything I could to hang onto my family, respect their beliefs, and not "rock the boat."

However, my big difficulty is trying to

STEPHEN: We're really talking about two things here, and there is an important difference, at least to me. I agree with you that it's not my job to educate or have anyone else share my interpretation of Church history. I'm okay with however people choose to interpret things. My bigger concern is that people do not even know the history and therefore they never have to, or get to, interpret (think, ponder, question) it themselves.

This relationship between interpretation and knowledge was the beginning of my own struggles a year and a half ago. I had always respected and admired (interpretation) Joseph Smith as the founder and Prophet of the Church. I had no reason to feel otherwise. However, when I found out (knowledge) that he was inviting young girls and women into marriage, often against their desires and better judgment, promising salvation for themselves and their extended family, hiding these marriages from his wife Emma, and so forth, I became concerned.

JEFF: If the history of Joseph Smith's experience with polygamy truly is as you've concluded, then certainly there is much to be concerned about. However, there are conflicting accounts and it is useful to remember that

agree, but understand). Frankly, I don't think your girlfriend's faith would be shaken by your concerns. She would likely think you've misinterpreted Joseph's actions and/or motives. She would think the enemies of the Church are behind the histories and they are not factual or accurate.

If she is willing to listen and is interested in understanding you, you should share your concerns with her. But not in an argumentative way, not in a way to tear down Joseph Smith or her own faith. But again, I think you should investigate your own response to these stories and your motives in telling others about them.

STEPHEN: My motivation is not to destroy her faith, or even have her think the way I do. I just want her to know my heart and mind and why I struggle with this and, in so doing, perhaps save our relationship. But by bringing these things to her attention, I cannot help but run the risk of challenging her faith. Is that a risk I want to be responsible for? She would probably hear me out if I asked her to, but I'm not sure it would be the best thing.

JEFF: You could explain your concerns and then ask her if she is willing to listen. Before you share, though, again you will need to look closely at your motives. In most dilemmas such as yours, there are the "presenting reasons" ("I want

her to know the truth," "I want her to understand me") and the not-so-obvious reasons: ("I want her to believe the way I do and see Church history as I do," "I want her to be angry at the Church"). I don't know your reasons (these were only examples of possibilities), but you need to explore your mind and soul and see what is happening inside. Often, when we scout out all our reasons for doing something, the urge to do it evaporates.

STEPHEN: Hmm . . . yeah. Good point. I admit, I think it would be nice to have "her believe the way I do and see Church history as I do" and suspect that is part of my hope. Mostly though, I want to be acceptable to her and understood by her. Right now, she thinks I am some kind of slacker from a Church standpoint because I "have to think about what the prophet says." (She's okay with me everywhere else.) I guess my ultimate hope would be that she could say, "I understand why you struggle with those things, and I'm okay with that."

JEFF: That is the ideal. However, you've brought up a different faith issue (thinking about what the prophet says before following) that broadens the divide between you and most Group 1 members. It may be an outcome of your

or so, Stephen's concerns and struggles evolved, and he me sent the following message.]

STEPHEN: The heart of my current struggle is outlined below:

I am burdened with feelings of sadness.

Is it okay for me to say less than I know and feel in a temple recommend interview, and perhaps even appear to agree with something I'm not comfortable with, in order to preserve love in my relationships (existing and newer) by having a temple recommend?

Am I "too fringe" in my thinking to ever hope for a marriage relationship with a Mormon woman?

JEFF: This must be a difficult time for you. Loss of important things in our lives is tough to deal with (e.g., love, testimony). Nothing I can say will heal the hurt or make the sadness go away, but maybe a few additional thoughts might help put things in perspective.

Sadness is an emotion. A difficult emotion. Unavoidable in your situation. But, like all emotions, it is manageable. Try to keep a rational approach. (Step outside yourself, and think about how it feels, what it does, where it exists in you, how it comes out). Keep busy, do fun things, be with people—time will solve this problem. Rely on prayer and God's love.

has tender feelings, and I feel I have hurt her a great deal by not discussing Church issues earlier in our relationship, before we became so attached. I guess I appeared to her to be every bit the Church man she desired. I worry that I let her trust me and love me while I struggled with my religious doubts. I guess my desire to be with her overshadowed thoughts of how all this could hurt her. I wish I could fix all that somehow.

JEFF: I don't think things are that drastic for her, but I think you've learned a valuable lesson about being tactfully up-front with people about your life and leanings. I think your friend will get over it, one way or the other. And she may learn a valuable lesson here, too.

One more thought. You might just lean back and give this some time. Don't put any pressure on her one way or the other. Just be there, being you. She may grow into a new way of seeing life, her Mormonism, and you. She may find your good qualities as a person outweigh her need for the standard, ideal (and largely cartoon) Mormon husband.

I know this is a tough time. But you've crossed a frontier and are entering a new phase of your life. It will be exciting but troubling. (You might want to discuss this with your bishop.) Just be

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exploring Church history and not getting adequate resolution.

STEPHEN: Fueling this reluctance to explore Church history, I believe, is the Church itself. Although they proclaim otherwise, my observation is that the Church does not want us to learn all we can, especially about its history.

JEFF: I don't disagree. I wish it were otherwise, too. If everyone were encouraged from a young age to study and understand everything and anything, and learn how to filter the junk from the jewels, most members would still be okay. Doing such open study early in life is like getting an inoculation that protects against serious infections later. Unfortunately, as others have pointed out, the Church has chosen isolation rather than inoculation as the primary approach to protection. Isolation usually works, but when the unsuspecting and unprotected are exposed to an infectious agent, they sometimes have a serious reaction. This sometimes happens to true-believers who, never having heard a discouraging word, find themselves overwhelmed and distraught when they learn or hear something negative.

[NOTE: About this time, Stephen and his girlfriend broke up, but that was not the end of the story nor their relationship. Over the next month

When we fall in love with someone, we're not just falling in love with the person but with a vision of how the future with this person might be. Apparently, your girlfriend wasn't so much in love with you as with her imaginations of some ideal life ahead. Apparently you didn't fit her image of the ideal man. Maybe this is a blessing in disguise because being with someone who understands you and trusts you is very important.

It is easier to mate with someone who shares your likes, dislikes, beliefs, thoughts, faith, and so forth. If your friend isn't in a position to accept you as you are, given who she is, there are others out there who will be more like you and more accepting of your unique character and gifts.

As for temple recommend interviews, you have entered a part of your life where absolutes are diminishing. It is best to respond to others with that fact. Given, for example, a temple-recommend question, "Do you have a testimony of the Restoration?" you can honestly say, "I think it might be possible, I have a few questions about it; I will have faith that it is true; I will act as if it is true," and so forth. Your bishop will probably give you the benefit of the doubt.

STEPHEN: I worry a great deal about my girlfriend and how she is doing. Our breakup has been very hard for both of us. She

honest with yourself and others. Prayer can help. Let your true, good, Christ-like character show through so that others around you can relax and appreciate the good in you. (And maybe even envy you.) Take this experience as a blessing rather than a curse. Curiosity and wonderment can often be better than "sure" (but dull) knowledge. Maybe in the future, you'll regain a firm testimony of Mormonism, but if not, accept all that is good in the religion and its people. That is the road to happiness in our culture.

STEPHEN: I've already spoken to my current bishop and a former bishop. They both think I might be being misled by Satan. I was sincerely looking for help and simply wanted them to understand. Just having concerns and raising questions seemed to them to be a sign that Satan has a hold on me.

JEFF: Some members (and even some bishops) have a binary outlook on life: "things are black or white," "you're either with me or against me," things come only from God or the Devil." As such, they may think that questioning must come from Satan. Frances Lee Menlove has written about how those who desire to discuss their questions or doubts in these circumstances often find communication difficult or impossible.¹ And without meaningful discussion, good members can feel alienated from the

Group 1 community. You'll have to be careful not to fall into that trap.

STEPHEN [writing a month or so later]: Updates. My friend and I have had some further discussions. We're both pretty clear now on where the other is with religious thoughts and beliefs. It was tough getting there (mostly because of my not knowing how to explain things), but I think it will help us make better decisions regarding our relationship. I don't feel like I'm hiding anything from her anymore, which is a relief. She was willing to read some of the things I've been concerned with, mostly in regards to Joseph Smith's polygamy, which was completely new to her. So far, she considers most of it ridiculous, unfounded or, as you predicted, lies. Now, she pretty much knows where I'm at and why (misguided as it seems to her), so I feel like I've given it my best shot there. It still hurts a great deal, for both of us, and probably will for awhile.

JEFF: Yes it will. But you're doing as well as can be expected. Believe me, there have been much worse outcomes.

In an earlier message, you described all the good things you find in the Church, all the good things it had done for you. When I balance that with your concerns over history, polygamy, and so forth, I wonder if there is not some compromise you could make for and within yourself. Has your faith in all other factors of the Church been weakened? Have you come to distrust all other LDS faith claims? If not, here is an attitude that might work: "I will accept the less desirable aspects of the religion and balance them against other more desirable aspects."

STEPHEN: Hmmm, yeah. Good questions. I'm not sure what you mean by "accept the less desirable aspects." . . . What would this acceptance consist of? I can accept that Joseph Smith's polygamy experiences happened. I can't accept them as appropriate, or worse, holy. Nor could I defend them as such. I feel I'm being expected to do that.

JEFF: Other descriptors might include: "less well accepted" or "less understood." You could take every trait of the Church and line them up from "most desirable" to "least desirable" and have "difficult history," "polygamy by J.S." and "blindly following" on the less desirable end and put "Christ's teachings," "service," and "community" on the other end.

STEPHEN: Yes, there is much that I like at Church that I would like to hang onto. I love how members of the Church care for and watch out for one another. I want to be a part of that. I like the clean living. I like the basic teachings of being a good person, striving to be better, and so forth. I recognize there is

much good, and I want to hang onto all that I can in spite of my concerns. Will any Mormon girl be okay with this approach?

JEFF: Yes, there are good LDS women who will accept you as you are. (Quite a few may read this column, for example. Maybe SUNSTONE readers will respond with some suggestions.)

STEPHEN: I attended another church about a year ago, just to see what it was like. In what could best be described as a "testimony meeting," a gentleman got up and spoke. He said he struggled to believe in God and wasn't even sure there was such an entity but still wanted to live a good and decent life and to associate with others who want the same. This guy was still accepted and fellowshipped at that church. He was there for human contact and understanding, not to be judged or shunned because he doubted or disbelieved.

I can't imagine someone getting up in an LDS testimony meeting and saying, "I'm not absolutely sure Joseph Smith was a prophet" or, "I have questions about the Book of Mormon" or, "I'm pretty sure polygamy was wrong, but I like and respect you and want to be part of the Church." But it's getting more and more difficult for me to not say something like this.

JEFF: Perhaps you ought to try it. I have. But be prepared to be a card-carrying Borderlander from that point on.

STEPHEN: Maybe a few years down the road, I'll be kicking myself for not just going along with things, not tap dancing around temple recommend questions, never disagreeing with anything Church-related, and not salvaging my relationship with my girlfriend. Right now, I don't see a way to do that and maintain my sanity.

JEFF: Given only those two options, it would be better to maintain your sanity. But there are more options. I have two favorite quotes that offer hope for those on a path like yours. "Skepticism, riddling the faith of yesterday, prepares the way for the faith of tomorrow" (Romain Rolland). And, "In all things it is better to hope than despair" (J. W. van Goethe). ☺

NOTE

1. Francis Lee Menlove, "The Challenge of Honesty," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (spring 1966): 44-53.

Please send me any of your tales from life in the Borderlands.

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